

Moral Values of a People - their Corrosion, Erosion and Denudation

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It is our candid opinion that this subject is worth taking up for really serious discussion today more than ever before. More so on a day of the full moon when a considerably large percentage of the people of the land still continue to be Buddhist. With a reasonable amount of travel abroad, we feel it is correct to say that this situation is true the world over. But let us be reminded that charity begins at home. We insist that in self-correction on these lines, we have to begin right here in Sri Lanka where the deterioration has hit the rock bottom. Let us familiarize ourselves at the very outset with the basic dictionary meaning of morality. It is just goodness of human character. But as far as we sense it today the distinction between good and bad is being ignored or challenged everywhere.

How many of us in this country, both above and below, need to be rudely awakened to the fact that a sound foundation in good morality came to the Sri Lankans more than two thousand three hundred years ago with the arrival of Thera Mahinda from India with the message of Buddhism? The sociologically important cultural change brought about in Sri Lanka from the time of Devanampiya Tissa to the time of Duṭṭhagāmanī deserves much more serious study than it receives today, both from the rulers and the ruled. Equally well from the school goers and our senior citizens. It is even more important to refer to the teachers and the taught at the higher centers of learning like the universities.

From the reign of a selfishly pleasure seeking deer-hunter of a pre-Buddhist era like Devanampiya Tissa, we move within the next two hundred years to kings like Amaṇḍagāmanī Abhaya, Aggabodhi and Mahinda who even forbade the killing of animals in the land with their *mā ghāta* policy. Beginning with this primary humanitarian policy of respect for all forms of life, which is now gaining

ground as the norm of the civilized world, many other areas of cultural enrichment began to appear in this country of Sri Lanka.

Sanghamittā Therī who soon followed her brother Thera Mahinda, on her arrival in Sri Lanka, is said to have brought with her many young learned *bhikkhunis* [*daharā bhikkhuniyo*] who set the norm, as it were, to Buddhist leaning in this country. By the time of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, i.e. within less than two hundred years, large numbers of *bhikkhunis* were available in the south of Sri Lanka to go and teach even the Vinaya in the Anuradhapura region.

The fountain head from where this wave of culture flowed to Sri Lanka is undeniably Buddhism. In this early period, Buddhism had not lost its freshness. In fact it had undergone reform in India during the third Buddhist Council summoned by Emperor Asoka. Dissident schools have had no time to show themselves up. This is clearly evident from the kind of early teachings with which Thera Mahinda is said to have initiated his missionary work. Have you yourselves, without leaving it to the so-called amateur sociologists, examined the texts like the Cullahatthipadopama Sutta, the first text with which the royal missionary instructed the king of Sri Lanka. From that very incident we learn that rulers, more often than not, do need to be well instructed on the fundamental values of Buddhism.

In spite of whatever shortcomings he may originally have had,, Devanampiya Tissa soon understood the basics of the new religion and virtually fell in love with it. That was our good luck, good luck of the Sri Lankans. That blessed our land and its people. It was that conviction about the worth of Buddhist teachings which made the king request the Thera to include his palatial residence within the *sīmā* boundaries of the monks so that he may live, literally as it were, under the command of the Buddha. This kind of thing could happen, we insist again, only with the presence of the wisdom of the rulers. They have to be honest about it. outside the election platforms as well.

Let us now take a look to see how much Buddhism does contribute towards the build up of a successful lay society. When we say successful, we have more than one area in mind. With its insistence on *sīla*, Buddhism looks forward to thorough moral soundness in society. Healthy inter-personal relationships are held in high esteem. The *pañcasīla* for instance aims at a perfect guarantee of a great deal more than **human rights** as known to the western world. Buddhism also recognizes the need for economic success in any social set up, no matter what its political ideology may be. But it is equally important for the Buddhist that no form of economic development should overlook justice, fair play and humanitarian considerations.

At times there is a talk going around in academic circles that Buddhism is essentially a monastic religion and that there is nothing specifically laid down for the lay community. This is the kind of research that has been going on almost throughout the last century, initiated by foreigners and slavishly supported and upheld by some locals who know very much less than they need to know about Buddhism. We make bold to say that nothing is further from the truth than this. This is an utterly erroneous conclusion arrived at through mistaken assumptions. This blunder is being committed over and over again.

It is true that the whole of Buddhism primarily aims at finding a way out of the ills of *samsāric* existence. This means that Nirvana has to be its one and final goal. It is everybody's right as well as requirement to strive for it. Some of these researchers, both old and new, do not seem to know even this basic fact. It is the intensity of application which may vary from person to person. But certainly there is no deviation from the main track and its final achievement. This is very clearly stated in the Muni Sutta of the Sutta Nipata [Sn. v. 221] where it emphatically says that the blue-necked peacock which flies in the sky shall never equal the geese in flight. In the same way the layman shall never equal himself with the sage who intently meditates in the woods in solitude.

It is admittedly only a trusting good layman [*saddho kulaputto*], with wise

judgement, who qualifies himself to pursue the path to Nirvana. On hearing the teachings of the Buddha, either from the Master himself during his life time, or from any of his disciples who are competent to preach the dhamma in later times, those with a commendable degree of earnestness, realize the seriousness of the task and for that purpose choose to leave the household life and take to a life of renunciation. In Buddhism, this is the invariable commencement of *pabbajjā* or the life of religious mendicancy. To say that either the Buddha only preached a life of asceticism for the monks or that in his religious teachings he delivered nothing to lay community, is abominably untrue. It is no less than sheer nonsense.

The layman who hears the teachings of the Buddha and is convinced of its relevance and usefulness which are expressed with the words *sāttham sabyañjanam*, takes to it immediately and applies to be an ardent follower of the Buddha and a pursuant of the dhamma. That is what is meant by saying ***saraṇam gataṃ*** This is what is called becoming an ***upāsaka - upāsakaṃ maṃ dhāretu***. Such a person becomes a lifelong follower of the Buddha thenceforth: ***ajjatagge pāṇupetaṃ saraṇam gatan ' ti***. Initiation into Buddhism does not end at that. The Buddhist way requires that the Buddhist follower must initially and primarily establish himself in a life of good morality. This makes a Buddhist a *sīla sampanna*. If this concept needs further explanation, it just means that such a human being is initially in perfect harmony with the world in which he lives. That is the basic content and role of ***sīla***. It is nothing apart from our daily life. ***Sīla*** is good life itself. Viewed from a different angle, it is the respect of **human rights**. They were indicated to mankind more than twenty-five centuries ago, well before the establishment of the so-called United Nations.

That is why everyone has to know that a true Buddhist has to begin his Buddhist religious life with these two basic adjustments. First and foremost, the acceptance of the ***tisarāṇa***, i.e. 1. the Buddha as the leader and guide in one's religious life, 2. the dhamma as the infallibly prescribed way for the attainment of

the desired goal of Nirvana, and 3. the sangha as the indisputable proof of the efficiency of the Buddhist way of religious life. And **secondly, that a Buddhist must begin his religious life with the fundamental discipline of self correction and self adjustment in terms of the five basic injunctions of the *pañcasīla*.**

Now for a few further observations about the *pañcasīla*. Buddhist teachings are essentially for all mankind. They are universal and are not for any chosen few. Nor for any ethnic group of any specified area over which people do fight eternal wars. This is so because it is not a special dispatch from heaven above to a chosen group who are specially favoured by the divine. Buddhist teachings are for all mankind. Do we Buddhists know at all that the breach of the five precepts of the *pañcasīla* is referred to as the fivefold social hostilities or *pañcaverāni* and fivefold social dreads or *pañcabhayāni*?

Such a person is referred to as lacking in good morality: *appahāya pañcaverāni dussīlo iti vuccati*. It is a reckoning in terms of a man's social worth in the world in which he lives. In this context let us remind ourselves of the three remarkable verses in the Dhammapada, numbers 246 to 248 which emphasize the down-to-earth value of the *pañcasīla*. He who cannot keep the five precepts from respect for all life or *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī* to abstinence from intoxication through alcohol and drugs or *surāmeraya majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī* is said to be bringing about his own ruin here and now: *idh 'eva eso lokasmiṃ mūlaṃ khaṇati attano*.

Let us also remind ourselves at this moment that according to Buddhist teachings, one cannot break up this set of five precepts of the *pañcasīla* and opt to observe one or another of the precepts according to one's own choosing. According to the Buddha himself, we cannot claim that any one of the precepts is more important than the others. The *pañcasīla* is regarded as a collective totality as we observed above under *pañcaverāni* and *pañcabhayāni*. It is the minimum of social discipline, for the sake of social harmony, to be observed as a whole. This was the Buddha's specific admonition. An apparent error of simplification in

the observance of *sila*, of picking up precepts according to one's own choice, now seems to be evident in some modernist circles at metropolitan levels.

Today, the third millennium witnesses a disastrous breakdown of moral values in the world everywhere. The corrosion is lamentably widespread. Humans do not respect humans as humans, neither with regard to their lives, i.e. their right to live, nor with regard to the ownership of their possessions. The ease with which human life came to be destroyed during the world war II in the large scale invasions in the European theater and elsewhere, the ruthless massacre of armies in the battle fields and the devastation caused by the atom bomb as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki has brought about a murderous spirit of individualism, armed with which the destruction of the other, person or thing, in the name of religion, political ideology or ethnic identity has become mere child's play. We know how United Nation's talks about human rights fall on deaf ears or receive scant respect in the hands of world power blocks or even among warring monstrous minorities. There is a total disrespect and disregard for these rights. Having nakedly witnessed such outrageous attitudes to human values, it has become everybody's turn to disregard them.

Now back home in Sri Lanka, we feel that the position with regard to the breakdown of moral values is equally bad here. There is an urgent need for their restoration. First let us look for the cause of the breakdown and thereafter visualize the restoration. We feel it is traceable to a very distant past. But for practical reasons let us not go too far back.

After a reasonably long period of colonial rule, it is a post-war Sri Lanka that gained its independence in 1948. Many at the top did not want to lose the imperial glamour they had acquired from their former rulers. This applied to all areas of life like the way they dressed, the food they ate and the language they used in their homes. They were getting more disoriented than ever before. There was going to be more lavish imitation of the west. With this also came a more materialistic outlook on life, with a far greater stress on the joys of day to day

living. Religion began to recede to the background. Religion came to be misrepresented, indeed by interested parties, as standing in the way of this Epicurean outlook.

With better avenues of earning more and more money and acquiring a far greater capacity for spending, there emerged a new form of social elitism, spreading over diverse groups, both from the country and the town. A tendency towards population implosion set in, drawing more people from their very natural rural settings to a mechanized and mechanical city culture. Social ethics came to be reformulated to suit the needs of new life styles. Unfortunately, the city temples and city monks also began to lose their identities. The fountains of religious inspiration began to dry up gradually. The parents in the homes found very little time for value inculcation of their children. Everybody sought refuge in the so-called Sunday schools for this. But they had inevitably to be pre-occupied preparing students for the award of certificates at the end of the year.

Thus there came to be a lamentable vacuum with regard to moral values in the lives of the young and the old, equally alike. Therefore now there is the need today to set up the machinery for cultural regeneration in an acceptable new venue. More and more people are beginning to feel today that the home is the best nursery where the seeds of human goodness can best be sown and grown. Then we have to face the problem as to where one finds such homes where this task can be undertaken. It is, in the Buddhist tradition, where a mother and father jointly and responsibly undertake to rear children as their own progeny. And for this, Buddhism has very clearly laid down adequate instructions.